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ABSTRACT

A rationale for teaching study skills to black exceptional students is presented along with a suggested instructional approach. The importance of teacher and parent expectations is emphasized, as is the need for developing strategies for nurturing self-esteem, motivation, improved attitudes, and adaptive learning styles in exceptional black students. Active rather than passive learning is stressed, along with the development of positive attitudes that contribute to the formation of realistic short- and long-term goals and aim at getting students to work above minimum competency levels. Aspects of study skills that should be taught include preparing and planning an effective study schedule, keeping written records of assignments and class notes, becoming active readers, and selecting appropriate reading materials. Preparation for examinations should be another program emphasis, including reducing anxiety through teaching relaxation methods, making students aware of general content and types of questions on exams, and providing review sessions or other review methods. It is also suggested that individual and group counseling can help students acquire such habits as punctuality, cooperation and wise use of leisure time. (CL)

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TEACHING STUDY SKILLS TO THE EXCEPTIONAL BLACK STUDENT

-by-

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TEACHING STUDY SKILLS TO THE EXCEPTIONAL BLACK STUDENT

Numerous reports have documented prejudicial perceptions about exceptional children (Hallahan, et al., 1982; Haring 1982; Ysseldyke, et al., 1982). These and other studies (Roper, et al., 1968) support this judgment in their reports of incidence and prevalance figures that reflect differences for socio-economic status and other minority factors. Epidemiological studies report incidence figures for exceptional children, generally within 10-16 percent of the school population. (Ga. Dept. Ed., 1983; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982-83).

With approximately 12 percent (26,495,000) of our nation's population (226,546,000) being Black, this is our largest minority group. It is timely that C.E.C. should sponsor a special conference and workshops on the Exceptional Black Child.

EXPECTATIONS

Exceptional Black students are often viewed as poorly motivated and academically retarded, regardless of other educational classifications that qualify them for special programs. Without intended malice, these perceptions are perpetuated by professional as well as potential employers.

Administrators, teachers, and parents need to continuously assess their own strategies in nurturing self-esteem, motivation,

and other personal learning characteristics that influence progress of the exceptional Black student. Improved attitudes and adaptive learning styles can be taught, but they should be introduced through planned training of study skills that recognize individual differences.

The exceptional Black student can learn to be a better student. Teachers and parents can help students to develop realistic goals; helping them to recognize that I.Q. has little predictive validity for future life success. More important are self-perceptions which reinforce the notion that needs assessment, determination and hard work are greater predictors of future success in the classroom or on the job.

ACTIVE LEARNING

Students should be taught from an early age that learning is an active process and not a passive process.

Studies in educational psychology have begun to show that general principles of learning can be adapted to the needs of exceptional children, regardless of racial or ethnic differences. However, it continues to be an exciting challenge for professionals to meet the special needs of their exceptional students.

Regardless of classification (i.e., gifted, mentally retarded, learning disabilities, sensory impairments, etc.) there

are proven principles and methods which can help study performance for all ages. Modifications should recognize that younger and more handicapped children will require more "hands-on" guidance until they have established the independence required for self-directed study and work habits.

HAVE POSITIVE ATTITUDES

Be determined to work for what you want. Students should understand that training and education in the school setting are comparable to adult vocational activity. There are obvious obstacles associated with specific exceptionalities, but students must be taught -- and expected -- to work at or above minimum competency levels that they help to establish for themselves. Although some normative, standardized tests will be useful for assessment of needs and criterion-reference performance, the alert parent or teacher can offer a great deal of subjective aid. For example, recognize that appropriate reinforcement and reward systems should be in continuous use so that the student does not find it easier to quit before the job is completed.

Plan short-term and long-term goals that are realistic, considering the students' interests and strengths. Help the student to communicate these plans with family and others who can be supportive. Students are expected to gradually develop self-evaluation and motivational systems that make them feel more personally responsible for their successes, as well as failures. Planned training will also be required to teach students to make appropriate adjustments when they experience conflict or failure.

PREPARING TO STUDY

Maintain healthful living habits that nurture interest and energy required for good study habits. This includes adequate diet, regular sleep habits and an exercise program that can be supported by medical knowledge.

Regular study schedules should be inforced, allowing for the unexpected. Recreation and leisure activities should be incorporated into a daily schedule, but they should never take precedence over planned work. Scheduled activities and priorities can be set to a written plan. Students may begin to develop a self-monitoring system when they are taught to begin each day, week, or month with a review of scheduled activities. Handmade calendars and checklists can be simple, yet academically enriching. Students should be encouraged to spend one or more hours each day in activities that challenge them intellectually or academically; e.g., reading for pleasure, homework assignments, following current news events, or participating in appropriate "thinking" games.

Part of planning an effective study schedule is setting up environmental supports. For example, the student should be encouraged to plan study at regular times and in a place that encourages concentration on assignments. During study times, avoid all distractions, including personal or phone visits, and turn off electronic devices that interrupt attention. Study while in a reclining position or immediately after big meals will set

the stage for sleep, so avoid these traps. Effects of medications on attention should also be understood when planning study and recreation schedules. In general, each hour of study should include a five- to ten-minute break that allows the student to change physical and mental activities. Just as parent and teacher guidance will be needed to help develop goals assessment and rewards, their assistance will be needed in planning optimal environmental conditions that encourage good study habits.

WRITTEN RECORDS

Children should be taught that written communications are essential for expression of new information as well as reinforcement of old information. Learning to take written notes will help the child to understand that assignments should not be committed to memory. It may be necessary, in the beginning, to write simple words and sentences for the student, but repetition of familiar activities will encourage self-sufficiency in using printed symbols for following through with assigned activities. Although students will benefit from experiences in printing, spelling, and grammar, they should view note-taking in class as a way of attaining academic superiority. As they advance in their skills of written expression, students should be expected to maintain and organize class notes in an orderly style that allows for ways and regular review. Keeping dated notes in an organized section of a loose-leaf notebook, for example, is a practical way to review written information. Older students may even wish to rewrite or type class notes so that comprehension and sequencing become reinforcing benefits. While taking class notes, students

should be taught that they should avoid writing word-for-word what the teacher says, selecting key words or phrases that express main ideas. Whatever "shorthand" they develop, students should follow a consistent style which will be useful during review. It should also be recognized that learning is best when notes are reviewed immediately following classes, or on the same day, i.e., reviewing notes only for preparation of examinations will not be as good as daily review of notes. Parents and teachers can nurture development of these review habits by questioning children about their progress, and using written notes for recall of information.

READING

As in other academic subjects, developing reading skills for younger children should begin with scheduled intervals that are structured and well-supervised. Exceptional Black children should be taught that reading can be for pleasure, as well as for knowledge. Each child should develop reading rates that are appropriate to the text. For example, technical materials might slow a reader to comprehension of a few words per minute, while pleasure reading can be done at 500 or more words per minute. There are no acceptable standards that dictate how fast a person must read, so long as comprehension is achieved at the level expected for each student.

School-age children should be taught to be "active" readers, making notes and formulating questions as they read.

Reciting words does not insure comprehension and learning, so parents and teachers should encourage children to demonstrate understanding in some practical manner. Each student will benefit, in spelling and vocabulary, by keeping a personal dictionary handy to look up unfamiliar words.

Younger students need opportunities and encouragement to read aloud to an audience, but students benefit from different teaching methods. For example, some readers learn better auditorally while others learn better visually; auditory learners might continue to understand better by hearing themselves read aloud, even while alone.

It should be recognized that speed-reading courses can benefit the advanced student, but persons with skills below 5th-to-6th grade levels will probably not benefit from courses that strongly emphasize reading rate. Readers at all levels, however, are advised to rely on traditionally acceptable methods for improving reading comprehension: look for wholes before analyzing parts; glance through pictures, tables of contents, headings and other clues that prepare for detailed analysis; and use graphs or charts to help improve comprehension.

Above all, help the exceptional Black student to select appropriate reading materials that appeal to reading level, as well as cultural interests.

EXAMINATION

Taking tests can be stressful, especially when the exceptional Black student feels that direct comparisons are being made with other students. It is important to emphasize that each student develop a positive attitude that competition measures attainment of personal goals, rather than arbitrary group standards. It may be necessary to help some students reduce high levels of anxiety by teaching relaxation methods (Davis, M. Ph.D., McKay, M.,Ph.D. and Eshelman, Elizabeth R., The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook, 1990). Above all, students should be taught that success on examinations is an end product of good study practices that should not rely upon "cramming" the night before. When good study schedules have been in effect, test review will not cover new information. Review for examinations might be enhanced by having special tutoring from someone who can keep the student on the assigned task, but caution should be taken to avoid undue socialization between friends whose express purpose is to study together.

As part of preparation for examination, students should be aware of the general contents and types of questions. Especially when specific handicapping conditions could interfere with traditional test-taking, teachers should be expected to consider modifications for administering some examinations. They may prepare to offer special assistance which gives a valid assessment of knowledge rather than a reflection of specific handicapping conditions that have already been documented. For example, a student who has

a visual/perceptual problem may be more adept at taking oral examinations; or possibly be given extra time to allow for interpretation of written information.

Experience and practice will make exceptional students feel more confident with examination formats that include True-False, Multiple Choice, Essay, or Machine-Scored sections. Teachers can help by planning review sessions that include sample test questions in a format that will be similar to the true test.

OTHER RESOURCES

It is always helpful for the exceptional Black student to develop additional resources that might help with curricular or extra-curricular needs. Side benefits often develop when students express personal strengths that are not recognized by more objective measures. Encourage them to join service clubs that nurture avocational interests as well as socialization skills. Exceptional students will also benefit from the professional alliance that can develop by talking with school counselors and other community workers who will be helpful resources.

Individual and group counseling programs are especially valuable tools so that students learn to express positive traits that influence future success in the classroom or on the job: punctuality; preparations; cooperation; attentiveness; minimizing public awareness of specific disabilities; using leisure time wisely; and maximizing study/work time skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The exceptional Black student is often viewed negatively because of poor public perception of individual differences. By developing good study skills at an early age, students can learn to plan and develop a lifestyle that builds academic, socialization and prevocational strengths.

Professionals and parents can encourage student progress by exploring objective and subjective factors that affect study and work habits. Self-confidence, realistic planning, good scheduling, and ongoing assessments are important for all exceptional students. The exceptional Black student needs to learn basic life skills which all students need, and they should be taught that personal motivational systems will probably become greater determinants for future success than any other diagnostic labels that might be assigned during school years.

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